

# Civil Disobedience for Conflict Resolution: Gandhi and Thoreau

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The importance of civil disobedience in conflict resolution and peace negotiations has been universally recognized after the second half of the twentieth century. Civil disobedience as a powerful tool to fight the social and political injustices was first forwarded by Henry David Thoreau, an American philosopher and writer, in his acclaimed essay “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” published in 1849. Though Thoreau’s practice of this idea transported significant changes while fighting the unjust American Government in his time, the power and significance of civil disobedience was fully realized after Mahatma Gandhi practiced it to fight the powerful British Empire in Africa and India. Though it seemed in the outset almost impossible to defy such a powerful enemy without using weapons or any other means of violence, Gandhian struggle surprised the world with the notion that the peaceful protest done in the ground of morality and truth has an immense power in comparison to physical force. This political theory of Gandhi provides us with the way to see and arbitrate conflict in the moral ground. His vision also provides us a realistic understanding of socio-political issues than any other conflict resolution theories of the contemporary time.

Born and brought up during the English rule in India, Gandhi had a deep impact of English rule in his young days. Although he was not aware of who is ruling over his country and who the rightful ruler is, he was not happy with the presence of British rule. Talks and some minor activities amongst Indians against the British rule had sowed the seed of anti-English sentiment in young Gandhi. He had closely experienced the power and strength of Englishmen in those days, and in a sense, he was fascinated by their personality and smartness, not because he wanted to be a mimic man, but because he wanted to bring that strength in him so that he could fight the English. He writes, “I wished to be strong and daring and wanted my countrymen also to be such, so that we might defeat the English and make India free” (Gandhi 11). Such love-hate relationship with the English made him break some of the important traditional family rules. Under the influence of one of his friends, he began to eat meat, which is one of the most offensive crimes in Vaishnav family, and his parents were “particularly staunch Vaishnavas” (11). Though sometimes such breakage of traditional rules played hide and seek in his life, he could never give in to one thing, i. e. “truth.” He further writes, “I very jealously guarded my character. The least little blemish drew tears from my eyes” (8). And as the result, he found himself guilty of hiding a big crime from his parents, “hiding the deed from parents was no departure from truth” (11). Such strong adherence to truth became his way of life in his later days. The grown-up Gandhi is just the perfection of such truthful nature which made him firmly adamant in his

words, and a watchful guard against any sort of vile behavior. It is the same principle on whose foundation he developed the most remarkable principle of his political philosophy “satyagraha.”

Satyagraha is a truth force; it is, according to Gandhi, “an overall practice of non-violent action.” Non-violence as a tool of protest against the unjust government, Gandhi used both in South Africa and India and became successful not only to defy the powerful enemy, the English, but also quit the English rule from the country. But for Gandhi, non-violence is not only the peaceful method of protest, rather it has a broader significance. It is, he says “a way of life, full of compassion.” Though it may seem that satyagraha and non-violent action refer to the same thing, Gandhi treats them differently and proclaims that satyagraha is one special form of nonviolent action. According to Mark Shepard, Gandhi practices two types of satyagraha in his mass campaigns, which are non-cooperation and civil disobedience. Non-cooperation, according to Gandhians, refers to refusing to submit oneself with the injustices of the opponent. It took the forms, like strikes, economic boycotting and tax refusals. All these are carried out in a civil manner, without the exercise of violent actions.

Civil disobedience entails the breaking of law and courting arrest. The Gandhian lifestyle and the way makes us realize the two different but interrelated meanings of ‘civil.’ Defining this word, Shepard writes, “He used “civil” here not just in its meaning of “relating to citizenship and government” but also in its meaning of “civilized” or “polite.” And that’s exactly what Gandhi strove for.”

Breaking of law is one of the important practices of Gandhian civil disobedience. But for Gandhi it was more important to go to jail than just breaking the law. Such complexity of action makes one both the destroyer and follower of the law. J. B. Kripalani points out, “ every law gives its subject two alternatives, i.e., to obey either the primary sanction (the law itself), or the secondary sanction (accepting punishment for not obeying the law). In this sense, a satyagrahi who contravenes the law and accepts the punishment can be said to be obeying the law.” Gandhi firmly believes that a satyagrahi obeys the laws of the society intelligently, so that he can scrutinize and judge them whether they are just or unjust. In this sense, civil disobedience is not a state of going against the system but a critical observation of legal system.

Though civil disobedience today looks like it is purely an Indian practice, it has some connections with the idea of American philosopher and writer, Henry David Thoreau. A number of critics and writers have written a lot about the influence of Thoreau upon Gandhi. According to George Hendrick, in 1942 appeal, Gandhi has expressed his indebtedness to Americans this way, “To American friends, you have given me a teacher in Thoreau, who furnished me through his essay on the ‘Duty of Civil Disobedience’ scientific confirmation of what I was doing in South Africa” (462). During his stay in South Africa and in India after coming from there

Gandhi studied a lot the great writers of the world. It seems like, the Bostonian Brahmin of the woods, Thoreau had a greater impact in his philosophy of life. Talking to the American reporter Webb Miller in 1938, Gandhi says,

Why, of course I read Thoreau. I read *Walden* first in Johannesburg in South Africa in 1906 and his ideas influenced me greatly. I adopted some of them and recommended the study of Thoreau to all my friends who were helping me in the cause of Indian independence. Why, I actually took the name of my movement from Thoreau's essay, 'On the Duty of Civil Disobedience' written about eighty years ago. (qtd. in Hendrick 463)

According to Miller, it seems that the idea that Gandhi borrowed from Thoreau became a cornerstone to affect the minds of Indians and inspire them to defy the powerful British rule.

The nature writer Thoreau himself was a scholar of Eastern philosophy, and had read a number of texts originally written in Sanskrit. Principle of not harming others, and always following the path of truth is one of the essences of Sanskrit philosophy. *Bhagvadgeeta* was his most loved text which he had read many times repeatedly. It seems that Thoreau was deeply moved with this idea, and his essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience" is the reflection of his deep inspiration of Sanskrit philosophy. In that sense, it seems that Gandhi himself was a great scholar of ancient Indian texts, and the inspiration of these texts in his philosophy was not less influential. Farah Godrej writes,

Certainly, it should be noted that Gandhi's thought is neither fully Western nor fully Indian in character, inasmuch as such distinctions can even be made with any meaning. Deeply influenced by Plato, Thoreau, Emerson, and the Bible, as well as by the Vedic tradition of Hinduism, Gandhi's thought is more a complex synthesis of both Western and non-Western elements. Still, to the extent that it provides an alternative to (and, perhaps, a critical perspective on) the hegemony of Western categories.

Gandhian idea of satyagraha is not something which happened to be conceived all of a sudden. The very idea of truthfulness was inculcated by him from his very young age. Varieties of reading helped him solidify the idea that the path of truthfulness can solve every problem and it became a powerful weapon to fight the injustices.

At present, civil disobedience has become an instrumental tool to resolve and/or transform conflict, which is one of the imminent problems in the world today. Though majoropity of theories of conflict resolution since the later half of the twentieth century have been developed in parallel to Gandhian ideology of *Satyagraha*, quite scanty of them seem to acknowledge it. Thomas Weber writes:

It is puzzling that links between Gandhian social philosophy and recent conflict resolution/negotiation literature, especially given

the latter's Gandhian 'flavour', have received so little scholarly attention. While there seems to be no direct causal link between the two bodies of knowledge, conflict resolution literature in the guise of modern problem-solving and win-win (as opposed to power-based and zero-sum) approaches leading to integrative conflict resolution (as opposed to mere compromise and distributive outcomes) strongly echoes Gandhi's own writings and the analyses of some Gandhi scholars.

It is also equally true that there is much written about the influence of Gandhian praxis in recent conflict resolution/negotiation literature. It has been common that many celebrated Nobel Peace Prize recipients have acknowledged the influence of Gandhian philosophy in their intellectual ability. Weber further claims that Galtung, one of the prominent conflict resolution theorists, summarizes Gandhi's norms as least influential in conflict resolution literature. The present day conflict resolution theory primarily states the conflict resolution in three norms. The first norm states "first state your goal, try to understand the opponent's goals, emphasize common and compatible goals, state conflict relevant facts objectively" (Weber 494). The second norm correlates the conflict with nonviolent means. It explains, "do not harm or hurt with words, deeds or thoughts, do not damage property, prefer violence to cowardice, do good even to the evil doer" (Weber 494). Both of these norms of conflict resolution have the close connection with Gandhian philosophy of satyagraha. The third and final norm directs the conflict resolution to solution. It states, "do not continue the struggle forever, always seek negotiation, seek positive social transformation and seek transformation of both the self and the opponent" (Weber 95). This norm too echoes Gandhian idea and is not far from Gandhi's satyagraha. All three norms of conflict resolution have established Gandhi at the centre of conflict resolution. Gandhi, in that sense, stands as the forerunner of peace negotiator in the world today.

A scholarly book written in Gandhian literature *The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, beside analyzing Gandhian campaign, argues the inheritance of Gandhian philosophy in the conflict resolution literature today:

In opening up new choices and in confronting an opponent with the demand that he make a choice, the satyagrahi involves himself in acts of 'ethical existence'. The process forces a continuing examination of one's own motives, an examination undertaken within the context of relationships as they are changed towards a new, restructured, and reintegrated pattern. (Boundrant vii)

Some books and articles like, *Gandhi and Group conflict*, *Journal of Peace Research*, and *Gandhi Marg* have offered a tribute to Gandhian idea in the area of peace negotiations. These all connections between conflict resolution and Gandhian philosophy of satyagraha are testimony to prove that conflict resolution literature strongly adheres, and goes parallel with satyagraha. These two bodies of knowledge are complimentary in their principles and

goals. There is the possibility that the writers and practitioners of both disciplines could gain much if they treat to each other as the part of same discourse. The integrated knowledge of both can help better conceptualize the conflict and resolve in a sustainable way.

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